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# A Hertfordshire St. George; or the Story of O Piers Shonks and the Pelham Dragon.

BY  
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Hertfordshire folk lore,  
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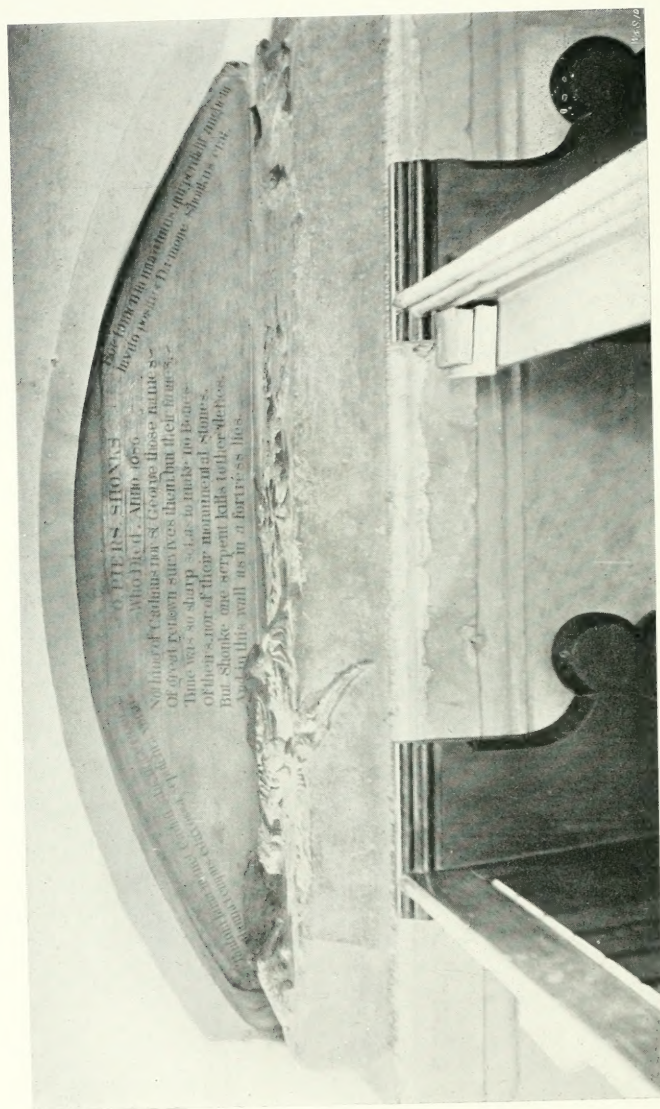
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TOMB OF O PIERS SHONKS AT BRENT PELHAM.

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BY W. B. GERISH.

THE moated site whereon stood the dwelling-house of a renowned hero, who has been termed a "Hertfordshire St. George," is known as "Shonk's Barn" from a building which stood thereon in Salmon's day (1728), and which was in existence when Cole visited it in 1760; "O Piers Shoonkes," so called by Weever in 1631; "Shonks Garden," "Shonks Moat," and as plain "Shonks." It is described in the "Moats and Moated Sites of Hertfordshire," by Mr. R. T. Andrews,

"as being towards the east side of the parish of Brent Pelham, about half a mile from Washall Green. It is rectangular, enclosing an area of nearly one and half acres, lying at about 42 feet Ordnance datum, and running south-west to north-east. The south-west side is not straight, but has two sharp angles in it, which together bring it into its original direction. From one of these angles and from the north-west angle there are two continuing fosses, now dry, which are each nearly 300 feet long, and are connected at their ends by a curved dry fosse. From the south-east point of this connecting fosse a short pond is still in existence, and there are indications that there may have been a third enclosure. The total area enclosed is at least four and a quarter acres."

This, then, was the site of Shonks' abode; now for the man and his story.

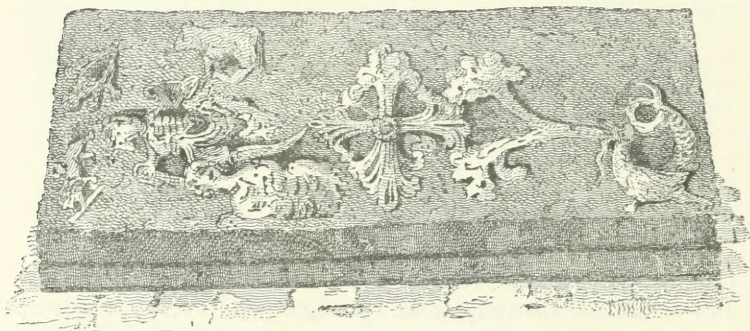
The task of separating actual events from the legends which commemorate them has always been a matter of the utmost difficulty. In this instance the story varies but slightly in its relation, so one has little trouble, as in other cases, in striving to reconcile the various narratives of the same event. Perhaps the simplest plan is to divide the subject into three, viz., first, the Legend; second, the Facts; and third, the Theories as to its origin.

### THE LEGEND.

The Pelham district was troubled with an enormous dragon that committed great havoc with the flocks and herds of the neighbourhood. Piers Shonks, a valiant man and a renowned hunter, determined to destroy the reptile; therefore fully armed with his hounds, so swift of foot that they were said to be winged, he sallied forth in search of the monster. The dogs soon gave

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tongue, and by their attacks and noise so distracted the attention of the dragon that it gave Piers an opportunity to thrust his spear into a vulnerable part and speedily despatch it.<sup>1</sup> Instantly the death-struggles had ceased the Evil One appeared, vowing vengeance on our hero for having destroyed his emissary, and threatening to have Shonks after his death, body and soul, whether buried in the church or out. Shonks modestly replied that his soul was his Maker's, and, as to his body, that should never be the Evil One's, for his burial would not be in the church or outside. Many years after the great event of his life, feeling his end drawing nigh, he called for bow and arrow and shot a shaft in the direction of the church. The arrow passed through the window on the south side of the chancel (which prior to the rebuilding in about 1860. was built on the skew) and struck the wall of the nave on the north side. In this wall, therefore, Piers directed his body to be buried, and expressed the wish that a representation of his achievement should be carved upon his tomb.



### THE FACTS.

The Latin verse with a rather free translation on the tomb is not recorded by Weever in his "Funeral Monuments," published in 1631. He simply states that :

"In the wall of this Church lyeth a most antient Monument: a Stone, wherein is figur'd a man and about him an Eagle, a Lyon and a Bull all having Wings ; and the fourth of the shape of an Angel, as if they should represent the four Evangelists ; under the feet of the Man is a Cross Fleurie, and under the Cross a serpent."

<sup>1</sup> A variant states that he "chanced to kill a dragon," a too prosaic statement for so great a feat.



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Mr. Edward Exton Barclay has furnished a copy of two variants of the inscriptions made by Thomas Jugge, who was Vicar from 1683. to 1725. Jugge speaks of these as "formerly" in the church, and Chauncy, writing before 1700, likewise informs us that they were "formerly over the tomb." That now existing must have been painted before 1728, when Salmon saw it.

The earlier of the two inscriptions reads :—

"Cadmi fama manet, tantum tua Fama Georgi  
Posthuma, Tempus edax Ossa, Sepulchra vorat :  
Attamen hoc Tumulo, Shonkus qui perdidit anguem  
Invito Satano caute sepultus erat.

"Cadmus<sup>1</sup> his Fame, St. George<sup>2</sup> his Fame alone,  
Their Tombs and Ashes all are gone :  
But Shonks who valiantly ye Serpent wounded  
In spite of Satan, here he lies entombed."

The present inscription reads :—

"Tatum fama manet Cadmi sanctique Georgi  
Posthuma, tempus edax ossa sepulchra vorat.  
Hoc tamen, in muro tutus, qui perdidit anguem  
Invito positus Daemone Shonkus erat

O Piers Shonks  
Who died, Anno 1086.

"Nothing of Cadmus nor St. George, those names  
Of great renown, survives them but their fames ;  
Time was so sharp set as to make no Bones  
Of theirs, nor of their Monumental stones.  
But Shonks one serpent kills, t'other defies,  
And in this wall as in a fortress lies,"

<sup>1</sup> A Phœnician warrior and founder of Thebes. He landed in Bœotia, and sent his companions to fetch water from a neighbouring grove. The waters were sacred to Mars and guarded by a dragon, who devoured all the attendants of the Phœnician. Cadmus, tired of their delay, went to the place, and saw the monster still feeding on their flesh. He attacked the dragon, and overcame it by the assistance of Minerva. The story goes on to say that he afterwards sowed the teeth of the dragon in a plain, upon which armed men suddenly rose up from the ground. He threw a stone in the midst of them, and they instantly turned their arms one against another, till all perished except five, who assisted him in building his city. Cadmus is said to have lived about fifteen centuries before Christ.

<sup>2</sup> According to the "Acta Sanctorum" he was born of noble Christian parents in Cappadocia, became a distinguished soldier, and after testifying to his faith before Diocletian, was tortured and put to death at Nicomedia, in A.D. 303. He has been confounded with the Archbishop George who gathered together an immense fortune as a fraudulent army contractor, and in the end was torn to pieces by furious citizens. St. George the dragon-slayer was apparently a third person whose exploit, first found in Voragine's "Legenda Aurea," was attached by monastic legend-writers to the first-named George, and so passed into the office books of the Catholic Church. He seems to have been adopted as the English patron saint by Edward III in 1348.

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This latter inscription is stated by Salmon to have been composed by the Rev. Raphael Keen, who died in 1614. He was Vicar here for seventy-five and a half years, so the inscription can scarcely be older than 1540. Whether the former verses appeared on the tomb previous to those amended by Keen is not known, although it seems probable that they did, but it may be assumed that the tradition was popular at this early date, and that the worthy Vicar thought fit to perpetuate it in the Latin of his day, and, to popularise the story, also rendered it into English.

On the two buttresses on the north side of the church, between which lies the famous tomb, are three very large crosses, two on one buttress and one on another. It is believed that these were placed there to mark the grave, and were the work of the Vicar, Raphael Keen.

As to the monument itself; this is a thick slab of Petworth marble, on the upper part of which are carved in relief symbols of the four Evangelists, the Angel, Eagle, Lion, and Bull. The angel is depicted bearing to Heaven the soul of the deceased, which is represented in the usual mediæval manner as a small naked human being, with the hands in prayer, carried in a winding-sheet. In the centre of the stone is a cross fleurie, the stem of which is thrust into the mouth of what appears to be a serpent coiled at the foot of the slab. This latter doubtless represents in popular imagination the Dragon; the cross, Shonk's spear; while the symbolic animals are the hounds which assisted him at his great feat. Ecclesiologists, however, recognize these carvings as emblematical of the triumph of Christianity over Paganism.

Boutell in his "Christian Monuments" states that the design is not older than A.D. 1200-1225, while other authorities (Cussans amongst them) suggest A.D. 1300. to 1350. as the probable date of its erection. This, it is thought, disposes of the statement that Shonks died in 1086, as it is scarcely likely that the monument would have been erected so long a period after his decease. It is difficult to imagine from what source Weever obtained his statement that Shonks flourished

*"Ann à Conquestu vicisimo primo,"*

or, as Salmon states,

*"Anno a Conquestu 21,"*

though there can be little doubt that both Keen and Salmon obtained their data from Weever. According to Salmon there was a Gilbert Sank holding an estate at Pelham in 1277. His over-lord was Simon de Furneaux, and among the Exchequer Rolls



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is a distraint by the said Simon for Gilbert's default in paying "Homage and service and forty shillings and sixpence rent by the year. Fealty and suit at Court at Pelham Arsa from three weeks to three weeks." This is a usual manorial tenure, but Salmon suggests that Piers Shonks was the son of Gilbert Sank, who, "being oppressed by the tyrannical power of De Furneaux, his son might take the cause in hand and show his adversary's demands unjustifiable, and baffle him at law, by which he might do service to the neighbourhood, and save them from the same exorbitant imposition. And this was enough to canonize him."

Of course this suggestion entirely upsets the supposed date of our hero's death, and it is not easy to believe that a mere distraint for the non-fulfilment of the covenants of an ordinary feudal lease would have so widespread an effect.

With reference to the monument, the slab may have been the top of an altar-tomb, removed from the chancel. It is possible, too, that it was originally made for a priest, as stones bearing crosses frequently indicate ecclesiastics.

Arched recesses in church walls which contain graves are usually those of great benefactors to the fabric, and in this instance it might reasonably be assumed that whoever was buried therein had contributed largely to the rebuilding of the church, perhaps after the disastrous fire of the early part of the twelfth century. The process of church-building in those times was exceedingly slow in small country parishes, where both materials and money were scarce. The Dean and Chapter of St. Paul's would undertake the reparation of the chancel, but the nave was the parish's care, and the Bishop's officials were much too intent upon obtaining money for their own support, and that of the Cathedral, to do much to assist their 'peculiars.' So it is highly probable that for more than a century after the conflagration the church remained still unfinished, and that Sank or Shonks, perhaps as a thankoffering, undertook to finish the structure.

It has been suggested that this arched recess is an ancient doorway utilised for the purpose of a wall-tomb, but this is hardly likely. More feasible is the suggestion that the arch and tomb were rebuilt by Raphael Keen, as the arch is apparently of Tudor date, and the tomb is not of stone but of brick, while the inscriptions are of the phraseology in use during the time of Elizabeth.

With regard to the person buried in the thickness of the wall, no less than three accounts state that from the remains found he was a man of unusual stature. This may be assumed, too,

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from his name, really a nickname, Shanks or Shonks, i.e. Long-legs. His Christian name Piers (= Petrus), the nominative case of Pierre (= Petrum), is a Norman name, and is hardly to be met with as a fore-name much before 1300. The surname Schankes is to be found in the Hundred Rolls, but how the name came to be altered into Sank in a coeval document (assuming Salmon is correct in his spelling) is difficult to understand. It is hoped that the original entry may be found in the Exchequer Rolls, and thus clear up this difficulty.

The late Mr. W. H. Norris, of Watford, stated that between 1860. and 1870. a patriarchal old villager told him that he either remembered or heard that on an excavation being made in the wall near the tomb, bones, supposed to be Shonks', were found, and from their proportions would have belonged to a man from nine to ten feet in height. Whether they were replaced in the tomb or not he did not know.

This statement is borne out by one Thomas Tinworth, an elderly man, who, in 1899, told Mr. Barclay that his father was the person who explored the tomb during some repairs in 1835. He found that the recess went a long way down, and in digging into it he found some very large human bones, evidently belonging to a man of great stature. Mrs. Hudson, an extremely interesting octogenarian living at Barkway, tells me that when a girl she sat in the Bury pew in Brent Pelham Church, and her feet rested on the tomb. She states that about 1836. the tomb was opened by Mr. Brand and Mr. Morris, both of whom she believes were churchwardens, and they each had a finger bone out of the tomb. One joint was as long as an ordinary man's finger, and the bones were double jointed. Morris "never had any peace with *his* bone," and had to put it back in the tomb. Brand also appears to have suffered, although not to the same extent, but Mrs. Hudson says "he never knew the going of his bone," or when it disappeared.

With regard to the Dragon's haunt, Canon Wigram kindly sends me the following, which he was told at one of his tithe-audits:—"You know, sir, there was a stile over which you used to go from Great Pepsells into Little Pepsells; it was in the hedge, inside a gurt yew tree that you used to go through. You have heard tell about Shonks, him as lies buried in the wall of Brent Pelham Church, and of his dragon. Now when this yew tree was cut down, it was Master Lawrence as cut it down (the grandfather, I think, of this Master Lawrence as now is at the Post Office), and they do say, sir, that the men could not

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get that yew tree down. And at last they all went away to breakfast, and when they all came back that yew tree had fallen down of itself, and when they looked there was a gurt hole right underneath it, underneath the roots a gurt cave like."

As the worthy Canon says, such cavities are frequently found at the roots of venerable trees, but the connection of this one with the legend is decidedly interesting. I have since been informed that fragments of the tree were carried away as relics by the villagers; and Mr. Skinner, of Cave Gate, Anstey, says that he has a quantity of the loppings in his garden.

In the garden of old "Blakesware" was a statue reputed to be that of Piers Shonks; it is now in the grounds of Bengoe Hall. It appears to be merely the figure of a shepherd with his pipes; one would have thought that such an effigy would at least have been Perseus, the Grecian dragon-slayer.

With regard to the place of burial being indicated by an arrow's flight, this incident is a common feature of the Robin Hood type of legend. The distance the arrow flew, in this instance nearly a mile, is simply to typify the archer's strength; another celebrated instance is to be found in the story of Jack o' Legs, the robber-giant of Weston, near Baldock.

## THEORIES RESPECTING THE ORIGIN OF THE LEGEND.

In various parts of the world remains of gigantic saurians have been met with during excavations, and geologists believe there were several species of dragons, from a monster with an expanse of wing measuring eighteen feet from tip to tip, down to a little reptile of scarcely a foot long. They tell us also that the bodies and wings were covered not with feathers but with scales, and the eyes of the creature were extremely large, possibly to enable it to fly by night. Two models of these pterodactyls are to be seen perched upon rocks in the Crystal Palace grounds.

One of the earliest works of man was the subdivision of celestial space into constellations, and this is alluded to in the Book of Job, who refers to the constellation Orion. Among these we find a dragon, and Old Testament writers constantly allude to their existence as if they had seen them. Job himself says figuratively: "I am brother to dragons and a companion to owls," and this more than two thousand years before Christ. Some fourteen hundred years later, Isaiah uses the expression "The dragons and owls shall honour me," and the prophet Jeremiah not only assumes the existence of dragons in his own days, but affirms that they shall not become extinct for some centuries to come, when he



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foretells that Babylon shall be a dwelling for dragons. But the passage in Micah is most curious where he describes the cry of the dragon, "I will make a wailing like the dragons," a cry such as a solitary nocturnal animal might be supposed to utter. Pliny, writing in the first century, describes Babylon as then lying utterly desolate, and it had then become the abode of dragons, shunned by the whole of Chaldea.

About the same period Solinus, a Roman writer, in describing the elephants that existed in large numbers on Mount Atlas, says they were frequently attacked by dragons, which sucked their blood, seizing them by their only vulnerable parts, the ears and eyes. Virgil describes dragons as having wings, and flying to a considerable height (*Æneid*, Book ii, 225). The Greek writers refer to the dragon who guarded the garden of Hesperides, situated at Mount Atlas, which Hercules killed, afterwards carrying off the golden apples which grew in the garden. Jason, too, by drugging a dragon set to watch the tree upon which the Golden Fleece was suspended, was able to carry it away without injury.

The dragon survives in China to-day—in art only. It is a wingless reptile, but from the strict regard for accuracy of the Chinese painters it is only reasonable to suppose that although now extinct, the earliest representation was made from the living creature, a gigantic lizard.

At the present time dragon's blood (so-called) may be obtained at the chemists; the name is doubtless a survival of mediæval alchemy.

A famous dragon was Fafni, the guardian of the Nibelungs hoard. Such monsters are celebrated in a series of poems in the Scandinavian tongue, the earliest of which now extant do not go back beyond the middle of the tenth century. Allusions to the story of the fight with the dragon occur in the English epic poem "*Beowulf*," which dates from the first half of the eleventh century. The foregoing were written after the Norsemen and Saxons had come into contact with Christianity, probably after their conversion thereto. They are, therefore, it is suggested, attempts to give Pagan stories a Christian setting.

Dragon stories like those of Piers Shonk are simply Norse mythological traditions transplanted to English soil. One of the most frequent among the Saxon sculptures is the dragon, and there may have been a Scandinavian settlement here in the ninth or tenth centuries. We find a general belief in a great world serpent which has ever been a power of evil from the time of Adam downwards.

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What is termed the Solar Myth origin has found considerable acceptance as an explanation of the hero and dragon legends. The dragon is the Power of the Air, the Storm King; the hero the Sun, who with his sword, the lightning flash, disperses the clouds, and finally pierces them with his rays, and drives them away vanquished.

Dragon legends are localized at very many places in England, more especially in the northern counties. Among the best known are the Dragon of Deerhurst, in Gloucestershire; the Dragon or Worm of Bishop Auckland, which was slain by the Pollard; the Dragon of Sockburn, in Durham (the falchion with which Sir John Conyers slew the reptile is still in existence); the Lambton worm; the Laidley worm; the Linton worm; the Mirdeford Dragon, and many others. Then there is the celebrated legend of Perseus, perhaps the most noted example of all. Caxton in his "Golden Legend" tells of St. Margaret, who was actually swallowed by a dragon, but was miraculously delivered by the reptile breaking asunder. The lives of St. Martha, St. Veneranda, and St. Radegund contain adventures with dragons, but the monkish chroniclers are careful to point out that the dragon, who was the Evil One disguised, was not killed, but simply temporarily disabled.

It is perhaps going beyond the limits of a paper of this kind to attempt to deal with the question of the existence of gigantic saurians in this country. We have in the *Cetiosaurus* one of the two known examples of the Sauropodous Dinosaurs, the other being *Diplodocus*. It was the largest known four-footed animal, and measured some sixty feet in length. Of this the tail occupied 26 feet, the body 12 feet, and the neck and head 22 feet. The length of its legs was about nine feet. The tail and neck were very prehensile; the head in proportion was very small, comparable in appearance to that of a lizard.

The *Cetiosaurus* is described as a gigantic herbivorous reptile. Its weight must have been so great that it is difficult to believe that it was active on land. Remains are often found in marine deposits, and Professor Cope suggests that they lived on the sea-shore browsing on seaweed just below low water-mark. This would afford an explanation of their low slender necks. The animal would be able to walk in tolerably deep water, and reach the surface to breathe without swimming. A specimen which was found near Peterborough is to be seen in the Natural History Museum at South Kensington, while another which is in the Oxford Museum was found near that town.

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As the countries of the world became more populous, the solitary and predatory dragon disappeared, retiring into swamps and places inaccessible to man. It is interesting to observe how closely the heathen traditions, the discoveries of geologists, and the sacred writers agree in describing the dragon. It was amphibious, it preyed alike on fish, animals, and human beings, and it was, as Cruden says, a dangerous creature, mischievous, deadly, and wild.

I trust, in conclusion, that my attempt to elucidate the story of Piers Shonks has not proved tedious; mayhap, after all, the story of the combat is pure allegory, "the ceaseless, universal strife betwixt good and evil."

W. B. GERISH.







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